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Physically and Viscerally Made

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PHYSICALLY AND VISCERALLY MADE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Jenny Lynn Hutchinson
December 2009

Accepted by:
Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
Sydney Cross
Heidi Jensen

ABSTRACT

Through the mediums of painting and drawing, I seek to create a figure that communicates particular states of being relative to contemporary conditions in society. Today we are individuals consumed by visual media and interconnectivity. I question -in wake of those conditions- how often we are self-aware. By living our lives through these two devices, we increasingly satisfy external needs, but may neglect internal needs. This situation, I believe, causes a dislocation of mind from body, and allows us to behave body-less. The distortion that we feel viscerally and live physically is actualized through the paint and drawing mediums. An effective combination of paint and colored pencil manipulate the surface to create a more physical sense of the human body, contrary to representations conveyed in a photo or media source. Realistic and abstract elements that make up or apply force on the human figure create an imagined environment that simulates real life conditions. Varied objectives concerning color, pose, and arrangement throughout the entire series reveal an empirical narrative. It describes not a story, but reveals the non-visual boundaries between mind and body, in order to emphasize visceral and physical experience as important. Through drawing and painting, I can communicate my experiences through a visual form. I am not trying to separate myself from society; rather I think of how relative we are to one another in how these conditions affect our daily lives. As displayed by my figures in my imagery, life is constant and transitory. It shapes and transforms the people we are.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate the content of this manuscript to my parents Alan and Diana Hutchinson. There are no limits to the efforts you undertake to support me. I feel grateful to have such wonderful parents and you are right Dad your “genes run through my body” and for that I am truly blessed.

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Thank you...

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I.

Feeling Human Today

I use the materials of painting and drawing to tangibly embody content about our lives. I intuitively connect with my materials, which direct and translate my perceptions and imagination into a visible form. Within these terms, painting and drawing can be thought of as alchemy, because I transform my materials into content. By finding an effective combination of material and meaning, there is an aspect of enchantment in how I create a human form that can resonate with my audience. In my work, I obscure the edge between imagination and reality in order to emphasize the boundaries between mind and body. I investigate the human form through painting and drawing as a means to explore a visceral experience as subject matter. A visceral experience is a universal understanding of our bodies that I use to bring about subjective experience. I hope to communicate a description of what it is like to be human today.

In the Introduction of *Vitamin P*, Barry Schwabsky creates an analogy between Mannerists and Contemporary painters to establish the terms in which Contemporary painters create today (Schwabsky.) Both groups exist after an extreme revolution of theory and method in art making. Established ideas from the previous eras are embraced and reinterpreted in the present era. The Mannerists used the developed knowledge of perspective and focal point to distort their figures relative to their content. I use photography, similarly to reinterpret my human form. Since its invention, photography has influenced the way an artist can think about the depiction of a human form. By using photography as a tool to document an action carried out by myself, the lens helps to

enhance the amount of imagined information I use to create my imagery. It is necessary because I cannot observe what I look like as I carry out these actions. However, I can feel the movement, which I then translate into my transitioning form. The paint and colored pencil manipulate the surface to provide a more tangible sense of reality and physical representation of the human body. As the imagery is more corporeal, it is contrary to the representations of the human body conveyed by a photograph or popular media. The look and feel of the kinetic form empathizes with the way one interacts within their environment and attains self-awareness. It is a description of how external influences can alter our perception and feel of our own body. The imagery depicts the separation of mind and body that happens in our daily life.

In photography there are instances, such as the blur, that only a lens can capture. The blur in my compositions are imaginary, but I know what that phenomenon looks like thanks to photography. I use it to interpret the environment of the composition. The blur is not just a depiction of motion, but it also conveys meaning. It is psychosomatic, it is a way to represent both body and mind being transformed or altered. The camera also enables me to capture my motion at various states. Sequential imagery is a way for me to interpret physical and mental space. It directs my notions on how the transitioning figure needs to evolve and move within the space. Lastly, the cast shadows and various anomalies captured by the lens are not observable by my eye. They inform the way I imagine my biomorphic forms. By morphing parts of my body into voids such as cast shadows, I depict another type of motion. It is a visual representation of a visceral experience, because I convey movement that occurs within.

In an interview with Simon Schama, Jenny Saville comments that the lens and the computer are the “visual vernacular” of our contemporary culture. (Schama 129). I think this is an accurate statement, because these technologies have pervasively infiltrated our lives. In society today, the turbulence of our scheduled lives has somehow created a void or dislocation between self and body. As we are transient throughout the day fulfilling external demands, we increasingly neglect our internal needs. In being body-less, we meet the standards of society, but not necessarily ourselves. Furthermore, technology and the lens foster this dislocation of mind and body through the proliferation of imagery that distorts our perception of self. We are more apt to attain information off the Internet or from some media source about what we need or who we are. It is a cursory knowledge about our body and self that is subjective but not necessarily accurate.

These conditions of society inspire me to create my human forms, in denying the very things that make us human -the ability to have cognition of our own mind and body- I want to create a form encompassing what the disconnection feels like. I hope to make self-awareness more important. More than ever, I feel attentive of visceral experience, and by creating a form in this nature I simulate the complexity of ways that external entities dislocate self. The creative process is also a simulation of dislocation, because it is a photograph of me that I distort. The figures start as me, but become something else.

II.

CONJUNCTION, JUNCTION WHAT'S YOUR FUNCTION

The entire series is a continuous stream of thought from drawings to paintings. Each form serves as a precursor for the next with varied objectives concerning color, pose, and arrangement. The imagery is meditative; I make each aspect of the composition essential to display the themes of dislocation and distortion as a condition. Visceral and kinetic experience embodied by the painting and drawing materials actualize these conditions. The ambiguity of form and environment creates an allusive tone that cause an audience to contemplate what action is taking place, or what type of form is being represented. At different points the figure is simultaneously becoming, resting, or dissolving. It could be translated as past, present, or future. However, the narrative is simultaneous and empirical, it describes not a story but reveals the non-visual boundaries between mind and body.

The whole series of drawings and paintings portray a human form that interacts and transforms within its own space to convey internal and external awareness. The compositions start as drawings with the chance to become paintings. The empirical process is complimented by a more instantaneous medium at first, so that the figure and the composition are able to transform sinuously. To arrive at the content of dislocation and self-awareness, I juxtapose abstract and factual elements, to interpret information as physical or mental. The abstract elements are mostly imagined while the factual elements are derived from my photography. There is a play between the transformation or distortion of the figure dictated by the texture and color of the materials.

Abstract elements such as the blur and biomorphic shapes serve as transitional elements between foremost and background elements, they control how figurative components manifest or dissolve. The blur is psychosomatic because it is an area of stress on the figure, it is physical in how it portrays motion and psychological in how it distorts parts of the body. Depending upon its placement on the figure, it is a force imposing its will or it is a form expressing out of the body. The composition is arranged according to depth. The biomorphic forms are protruding out of behind the body to help insinuate optical illusion. These forms are usually background elements, sometimes resting just beyond the surface of the paper. It is a shape I formulate using cast shadows from the photograph or by turning planes of the body into empty space. The shape is only suggestive of a human being. I think of these elements as visceral, because visceral experience is something we feel and do but cannot visualize. I like to think of all the abstract elements as permeable skins, for they are an extension or disruption of the body and space. I call them skins of perception because they provide insight for the viewer of how the figure is participating in the space.

Pose is a formal element that evolves throughout the entire series. All the works portray a crouched or contorted figure. My reason has to do with the way a body will naturally distort when in these particular positions. Also, it is a transitory position that is an in-between state of standing or submission. When in this pose anomaly of shapes occur both within the structure of the body and the space around it. I pay attention to the different sorts of shapes to discern or fuzz their relative positions in space. The re-structure or re-organization of proportions and forms create tension between space and

the human figure. This subtle act creates a comparison of actual forms with imagined forms. By simultaneously displaying a stable, actual depiction of the body with, abstract, imagined representation of the body, the tension mimics the act of dislocation. Metaphorically it could be a comparison of a stable maybe ideal realization of self, verses a skewed and relative understanding of self. It is a visual description of the dislocation, we experience with ourselves as a result of external influence.

Saturated color and representational forms of the body are elements that occupy the foremost space while delicate abstract elements in dull, subdued tones dissolve into the background. I choose a complimentary color relationship as a staring point. It is a technique traditional to painting, because in choosing this system a wider range of neutrals can be achieved in conjunction with more vibrant hues to create dimensionality. Also, because I choose opposing hues a fundamental tension is displayed. Painting has a history of conventions to create dimension by emulating light. In my work, varied size of line and shape along with texture and color mimic the way our eye observes changes in density and distortion.

The inspiration for my palette begins with the Italian masters of fresco from the Renaissance. The Signorelli Chapel, in the Orvieto Cathedral has particularly influenced me. The bright and vibrant hues of color seemed as aggressive as the scenes represented. The color commanded your attention to interpret the scene as something critically important about life at that time in history. I thought, such a vibrant palette could easily be construed as access or decoration, however it was a sincere factor in creating meaning. I was able to truly understand how color could depict meaning about life, by observing

the Signorelli Chapel and many other frescos. Seeing color able to portray such intensity has inspired me to use color similarly in my compositions. In my work it is important my color have that same vitality. The use of color is another way I depict transformation because it arranges depth in the composition. This strategy is more natural to how we observe depth in life.

Scale affects a viewer's relationship with my imagery. It defines how they explore and understand the content. The smaller scale makes the figures storybook or photograph size, causing the drawn series intimate and introspective. An abstract narrative evolves not just within one composition but, from figure to figure. The earlier work is more reliant upon pictorial information where as visual narrative becomes increasingly more obscure and psychological in the later work. The boundaries between mind and body in the composition are addressed more concretely.

In *Opposing Perspectives* (fig.2.1), (one of the later drawings) two figures are present in an array of various contradictions. The lower figure appears to be falling, twisting in or out of focus, while the topmost figure seems to be rising, dispersing in variable directions. Shape, line, and color discern areas of flesh in comparison to dematerialized forms. The foremost space in both figures is occupied by apparently corporeal elements. The corporeal elements are not limited to areas of flesh but include abstract forms. Saturated hues, large shapes, and harsh lines designate these components in both opposing figures to be read as tangible. The lower figure has an area of flesh and the higher figure has a physical abstraction as the most substantial elements. Dissolute areas of the two forms function similarly. I contrast areas of flesh with abstract forms but

instead use subtle shapes, soft lines, and subdued hues. I simulate physical and visceral experience as both real and imagined by comparing areas of corporeality and substance with dissolving forms.

To unify the composition, I use proximity and grouping to create balance. Both figures have a similar orientation on the page and transformation using color, line, and shape. The foremost space occurs at opposing corners and borders. The space dissolves as you move in an opposing direction from the most saturated and corporeal border. However, the outer edge of each figure facing one another has a harsh edge. This is to insinuate that although visceral and physical experience are relative –in how we experience them universally- it is still subjective, we may all embrace or understand it differently. By balancing the composition the tension created between the two forms and various contradictions are more palatable. A distinction made between imagination and reality or mind and body, can be a disturbing situation. I want to define the condition of dislocation, but I hope by making the viewer more comfortable the content may be read more receptively.

As relative as the imagery of the drawings and paintings are to one another, they are apprehended by the viewer differently. The paintings function diversely than the drawings due to scale. The content is interpreted more physically. The viewer is no longer separate from the environment, but part of it. The forms of the body portrayed insinuate an obvious relationship with the viewer's own body. Michelangelo's *Bound Slave* series influence my paintings in respect to the figure ground relationship I create. With the *Bound Slaves*, both the space within the subject and the space surrounding the

subject are important. Photographs of these sculptures have no means of accurately conveying the way these forms physically interact with a viewer. In studying how these forms exist in space, I bring a similar sensibility to the creation of my paintings. Particularly, I study the different sorts of marks Michelangelo made to carve the figure that vary your perception of spatial awareness. There are areas of long, heavy marks to remove large sections of marble in conjunction with small delicately chiseled marks to render a knee or face for example. The longer marks are powerful and subtractive; they create general shape; which provides a way for the smaller chiseled marks, to come into existence. Michelangelo worked his form as a whole, creating a feel of ebb and flow of form and material. In relation to my work I like to translate ebb and flow with the way the figure evolves in and out of space. I bring that sensitivity and knowledge to the use of the body of paint to create my forms.

In *Emotion Re-motion I* (fig.2.2), textured paint creates a spatial narrative with the viewer. I am trying to mimic how Michelangelo's figures ebb and flow in space in comparison to our body, using paint. An area of empty space that would normally portray a torso has been replaced by long and thick organic linear marks. This area of space allows for a pair of thinly painted legs just below to jut out of the surface. I subvert the way one could expect to acknowledge space by undermining the rules of texture in painting. Empty space has thick instead of thin paint and I contrast it with an area of substance consisting of thin paint, not texture. This subversion creates tension within the form and with my audience. My paint and figure need this sensitivity, because I want the viewer to have a physical response to my composition. By creating illusive empty space

and substance, I intend to mimic how visceral experience is something we may feel but may not actually be able to visualize. The consistency of paint can alter an audience's perception of space, obscuring what they perceive to be real or imagined.

III.

OUR FLESHY EXISTENCE IN SPACE

My interest in the biomorphic form is relative to the artist, Inka Essenhigh. We both abstract the human form into a biomorphic figure to visualize a dialogue that communicates with our audience. The biomorphic form and medium meditatively materialize into a commentary descriptive of real life conditions. The processes are each reminiscent of automatic drawing from the surrealist movement and the Futurist's interest in time and space. We both direct a form of narrative by insinuating paths of movement and transformation.

In Essenhigh's *Screaming Victim*, the crouched figure purges other forms into the atmosphere. There is a distinct stream of conscious that happens simultaneously but has the definitive structure of a story. In my piece, *Transmute Existence* (3.1), the narrative is immediate; it is a single moment that embodies multiple movements. The figure, like the one, in *Screaming Victim* seems to be caught amidst the action; it is unapparent how the figure participates in this space. There is a question of how the figure is moving through the space or how the environment is imposing its will on the figure. It is a captive form transformed by unclear influences. Both *Screaming Victim* and my work have an aspect of performance because all the figures communicate a state of being that corresponds to a larger context. My figures, like Essenhigh's, are anonymous because the content is based upon universal experience -visceral experience we all have and similar incentives by society- that identifies us as human. By intentionally making the face absent, the figures convey a different sort of identity that is sensory or bodily. It is a

visualization of something that has no definitive tangible description. It describes a sense of ourselves we have all experienced.

There is a relationship between figure and environment, through kinetic-like movement that narrates action. Proximity of shapes, repetition, and texture create tension and transformation. The components portray time and space in both Essenhigh's work and mine. In *Transmute Existence*, larger areas of color that create shapes are juxtaposed with repetitious, saturated line to convey a figure struggling within its own body and also with the space around it. Traces of movement are left to display action, but the sequence in which this occurs is unclear. As author Bonnie Clearwater explains, Essenhigh's work is painting "that's about its own origin" and I think my work has a similar feeling (Clearwater 8). The form and composition evolve as a result of physical information relative to psychological information meaning the figure is engaged in both physical and visceral behavior. In Essenhigh's work there is a predominant story of science fiction that relates to our cultural infrastructures that in my work I am not completely participating in. I personally feel or observe a dislocation of self due to how technology has pervasively become part of our lives. I do not feel like we are becoming more machine-like or non-human, it is merely a condition of society. We now live and communicate this way. By presenting a viewer with a sensitive kinetic form that embodies mental and physical space, I hope for my audience to gain perspective of the state of dislocation in order to bring about self-awareness. I believe visceral experience is something we continuously replace, but need in order to live healthily and happily.

The following interview has inspired many of my concerns as an artist. This fragment of conversation communicates one aspect integral to my creative process. Here is a portion of an interview about process concerning painting conducted by Simon Schama with Jenny Saville:

J. S.: Look at that de Kooning on the wall over there, how the black runs over the top of yellow and you get a kind of warm-lit grey. Why is that so poetic? What is it? Within that one mark, it's like a secret, something that words can't touch; it's nonverbal. It says nothing and everything.

S. S.: That loaded brush, the marks being able to hold the emotion, it's just amazing and no photo captures it. Painting like that is really untranslatable.

J S: Painting is what it is. When it's really good, it makes your eyes widen, your breath deeper. You know you're standing in front of something incredibly important about your existence but you don't know why.

S. S.: That's it, you just described the experience. It begins with an obvious exercise of sight in an unobvious way- it triggers your imagination in ways that are impossible in routine life. Your eyes engage, then your brain. A whole ignition process happens.

J. S.: It's the instinctive nature of a visual encounter. It's like meeting someone that you're physically attracted to; you don't know why but its there. There's that kind of painting that makes your stomach jump. And when you're working you know when one area of painting works and one area is suffering. The painting is a kind of personal arena where you get to sort of spit out this stuff onto, and it spits back at you. It's being enough in control to go with it. I don't know how else to describe it (Schama 128)

This conversation establishes the very means by which I am inspired to create my figures. My work is a commentary on our particular existence. Yet, the images are also very much about the nature of making art. It is a visual language for me to communicate personal struggle and aspiration into a tangible form. By thinking of my painting and drawing materials as alchemy, I transform ideas and thoughts into something real that can then be relative to others. It is a form they can have an experience with. Both the

drawings and paintings have a similar sensibility by how illusion is created. The drawing materials can allude to something real, but the paint in a more pervasive way can create a tangible structure.

In Jenny Saville's and my work, both paint and photography are used as tools to create our imagery. My interest in her work is generated by her use of paint to create something corporeal. Jenny Saville is known for the fleshy and massive existence of her figures. There is a definitive and complex figure ground relationship using the anatomy of paint and focal point to communicate with the viewer. In my painted works, I use paint similarly. The anatomy of paint directs how areas of the body move in and out of existence. In *Emotion Re-motion 2* (fig.3.2), scale and texture play a large role in creating a figure ground relationship. By making a figure life size, the viewer is apart of the space not separate from it. The sculptural sense of mark making mimics Michelangelo's *Bound Slaves*. I contrast abstracted areas of flesh using saturated non-realistic color, with rendered areas of flesh using simplified flesh tones. Variation in size of mark and texture of paint compliment the abstracted and rendered process. It controls the movement of the figure within the space and dictates the transformation between elements. Contrasting elements create obscurity and allusion that make a very physical form psychological. It is the "obvious exercise of sight in an unobvious way that triggers your imagination" that Saville and Schama were talking about (Schama 128). It is an entrapped and transitory human form in a psychological and physical space that communicates states of existence.

Ruben's Flap is a particular work of Jenny Saville's that I think is most referent to my paintings. Aside from scale and corporeality of paint, the way she uses linear

transitions between flesh to fragment the human form is similar to my work. It is an assembled human form like my imagery that embodies an idea of dislocation between self and body, or identity and body. Like Saville, I use myself as source material, yet our individual identity is not integral to the meaning of the piece. With visual plethora being such an integral aspect of contemporary culture I am influenced to use photography as a means to create a figure of this sort. The lens has enabled me with the ability to envision a figure in this way. The photographs provide a catalyst to reinterpret visually what I experience and want to communicate. It is an intimate process between eye and hand, mind and body that becomes completely observable when transformed onto a surface. It has the ability like Saville said “to convey something incredibly important about our lives”, not only does the photograph enhance my process but the process itself is an act of distortion (Schama 128). By using photographs of myself, I portray another sort of existence that may be based on facts but is imagined. The process mimics the way visual proliferation from the media affects our daily lives.

Francis Bacon’s figures have a way of ransacking our nervous system and testing our senses. Bacon’s figures evolve from his own lived experiences and through observations about life. They are distorted in a variety of ways to convey a human that is captive in a tragic existence. Though we are both interested in using observed and physical elements to portray internal experience, my imagery is a bit less severe in nature. I use my materials and observations to portray the characteristics of an occurring condition in society.

We both make use of the blur not just as a means to depict motion but to interpret a psychological environment. In Bacon's work the blur is a description of lived experience as something violent and tragic. In my work I use it as a way to depict lived experience as it is. I provide little insight as to what emotion is being displayed. I want to portray imagery that describes distortion and dislocation as an action, the imagery is a depiction of what I imagine our mind and body experience when these conditions occur. Using color, line, shape and texture, I activate the surface of the canvas or paper to allude to something dimensional to stimulate one's own senses and thoughts. Again I refer to Simon Schama's statement on sight as an ignition process, "it triggers your imagination in ways that are impossible in routine life", because I want to make my experiences relative to my audience (Schama 128). By communicating my thoughts and ideas about life through visual means, like Francis Bacon, I hope for my viewer to have a sensory experience.

By comparing my painted piece *Falling Existence* (fig.3.3) with Bacon's Piece *Figure in Movement*, one can see how similarities of technique provide a viewer with a sensory experience that enables conceptual content. In both pieces pictorial cues organize the space. One example is how a cast shadow contends for physical presence rather than sinking into the environment. The stark color and sharpness of line creates tension with the surrounding elements making the arrangement of space indistinct. By having an unobvious arrangement of compositional elements, the environment transforms from being natural to psychological, cuing the viewer to feel uncertain and further investigate the composition. Color is another element that creates tension in these pieces. They both

make use of two intense values as a background, juxtaposed with neutral flesh tones. The use of texture further compliments color use, because as commanding as the saturated background tones are, they are painted smoothly in contention with the textured fleshy areas of paint. The textured paint separates the figure into the foreground cuing the viewer that the content of the piece is dependent upon the figure.

The poses of the two forms are similar in nature. The arms are forcefully separated from their sides and forced into the environment. In my piece *Falling Existence*, the figure appears to be falling. The action and the pose serve to simulate the loss of self we may experience due to external obligations. It is a description of how daily tasks can pull us from tending to our own bodies and needs. The cast shadow has presence because it is representative of the external influences that can define who we are or how we live, but in no means defines us as human. It is an allusion both in look and concept, like the visual media and daily tasks that distort self-awareness.

IV.

CONCLUSION

Visceral experience is an innate aspect we have, but it can also be a result of recollection. It is an instant occurrence that happens as a result of previously felt experience. Our body remembers how physical or emotional it has once been. This body of work not only portrays a description of physical and visceral experience due to conditions of society, but it is also a reflection of my past experiences. Previously, I lived the life of a gymnast and more recently a pole-vaulter. The sports are two death-defying activities in nature. When performing such potentially harmful movements, an athlete must separate body from mind. In order to control one's body in space, one must rely on trained physical awareness. On a daily basis I had to reason between learned states of a physical and psychological sense of self, especially if it was a movement that I had previously injured myself performing. There was a continual gap I needed to maintain between my state of mind and physical activity. I embraced a physical sense of self to dislocate the mental self from the nature of a risky activity. In art making there is a similar aspect of faith because of the way I depend on my experience with materials and technique to produce content.

The imagery appears timeless. For example in *Emotion Re-Motion (2)* a simplified but resolute knee sits just in front of linear abstraction, creating dissolution. The change in surface and transformation of real to abstract information mimics the act of a visceral occurrence. The piece is sequential by how things interact with one another, though there is no specific span of time, there is a seamless action of cause and effect.

With in this structure, not only do I think of how we are relative to one another as humans through visceral experience, but also how past, present, and future play a role in the act of dislocation. On a daily basis, I had to rely on lived experience; I dislocated my mind from body to survive an activity. In different ways for various reasons this happens to us all. This combination of sensation, observation, and learned experience facilitate the creation of this work. An effective combination of materiality and technique, create a context of meaning. It describes the nature of dislocation and how it affects our mind and body.



Figure 2.1

Opposing Perspectives

Watercolor and Colored Pencil

22" x 15"

2009



Figure 2.2

Emotion Re-Motion 1

Oil Paint on Canvas

52" x 69"

2009



Figure 3.1

Transmute Existence

Watercolor and Colored Pencil

12 ½" x 9"

2009



Figure 3.2

Emotion Re-motion 2

Oil paint on canvas

72" x 49"

2009



Figure 3.3

Falling Realization

Oil Paint on Canvas

79" x 53"

2009

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